

Alaskans Should not be Overly Concerned as Bird Migration Resumes

By Matt Robus, Director, ADF&G Division of Wildlife Conservation

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One of the surest and most welcome signs of spring in Alaska is the return of our millions of migratory birds. The honk of the goose, the croak of the crane, the ripping sound of a flock of shorebirds swooping over the mudflats all announce the arrival of the new season. But this year our welcome is a wary one.

As the Asian strain of H5N1 avian influenza (Asian H5N1), commonly known as Asian bird flu, continues its spread across Asia, Europe, and into Africa, many people are wondering if its arrival in North America will be aboard one of the birds migrating to or through Alaska.

Thus far, North America and Alaska have been spared any confirmed or suspected cases of Asian H5N1. But when you look at the aerial routes taken by migratory waterfowl and Alaska's location at the intersection of aerial migration routes, it is easy to understand why there is growing concern that Asian H5N1 could make its way to Alaska.

Asian H5N1 is not a new virus. The first major outbreak in birds was identified in Southeast Asia nine years ago. Since then, there have been many wild bird migrations and we have yet to detect the disease here, despite rigorous testing of thousands of birds. Nevertheless, the recent march of the disease westward through Eurasia, vividly illustrated on the nightly news, has heightened awareness of wild bird migrations and the potential for Alaska to be a gateway.

So why should we be concerned? Well, besides its potential to affect some wild bird populations, the virus has proven very lethal to poultry, such as chickens, turkeys, and domesticated ducks. The arrival of this virus in North America would be a significant threat to the poultry industry and could have serious economic impacts.

In a small number of cases, people who have had close contact with infected domesticated birds have also been infected. The fear is that the virus will mutate, as viruses are prone to do, to the point where transmission from birds to people would become much easier, or worse yet, could become transmissible from person to person – setting the stage for a global pandemic.

That hasn't happened yet, but we need to prepare just in case it does. Accordingly, federal, state, and local resource agencies and public health organizations are working very hard to track the status of the virus and its spread. To aid in the early detection of H5N1, if it occurs, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is working with other federal and state agencies to sample live birds, dead birds, domestic birds, hunter-killed birds, and bird habitat around the state.

But there is no instant test to tell whether a bird is infected with this strain of Asian bird flu. Samples will be processed in a network of certified laboratories around the country, including here in Alaska. If and when a confirmed positive test is found, the appropriate authorities will communicate the results to the public as soon as possible.

Even if we find Asian H5N1 in Alaska, there would be no need to panic and no immediate danger to people from wild birds. Again, the virus would need to change to the point where it is easily transmissible to humans. It has not yet done so, even though it has been around for at least nine years.

Wild birds and migrating waterfowl are not the only way that Asian H5N1 bird flu could reach Alaska or elsewhere in North America. The shipment of uninspected poultry and poultry products, as well as the illegal trade in live birds, have been important sources of the disease in other places. Wild birds may be as likely to be victims of bird flu as carriers.

Alaskans should not be overly concerned as the annual spectacle of the northern migration resumes. Anyone who handles birds should practice good hygiene – wear gloves and wash hands frequently. Hunters should keep their birds clean and cook them thoroughly. Bird watchers and others should avoid contact with birds that are dead or obviously sick. These are common sense practices that should be used whether Asian H5N1 makes an appearance or not.

So, go ahead, scan the skies. Listen in the cool quiet of early morning and late evening. Enjoy a meal from your wild harvest. And rejoice that we live in the midst of such a wild place.

If you find sick or dead birds, and no obvious cause is apparent, please call 1-866-5-BRD-FLU (1-866-527-3358). For more information, please visit <http://www.avianflu.alaska.gov/>

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